

News For Community Agencies Working With Homeless People in Seattle-King County

**From Health Care for the Homeless Network
Public Health - Seattle & King County**

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West Nile Virus: Fight the Bite

West Nile Virus: What You & Your Clients Need to Know

Public Health – Seattle & King County recently announced that King County can expect to see cases of West Nile virus this summer, given that the mosquito-borne virus infected people in surrounding states in 2004. We need your help educating those homeless people who spend time outdoors at dusk and dawn about precautions they can take.

What is West Nile Virus?

- West Nile virus is a potentially serious disease. It is spread by mosquitoes infected with the virus.
- West Nile virus is primarily a bird disease, but it makes humans, horses, and some other mammals sick too.
- West Nile virus is not spread by person-to-person contact. It is also not spread from birds or other animals to people.
- People over the age of 50 are at higher risk of developing complications or dying if they become infected with West Nile virus.
- West Nile virus occurs in humans when mosquitoes are present. This is usually spring through late fall in the Northwest.
- Mosquitoes are most active at night, especially during dusk and dawn. Therefore, people who sleep outdoors and are outside in the early morning and early evening are at increased risk of exposure to mosquitoes.
- There have been cases of West Nile virus among homeless people in other states.
- Not all mosquitoes carry West Nile virus, and not every mosquito bite will result in infection. People should not over-react to mosquito bites, but should take precautions to reduce the risk of being bitten, and be aware of potential signs and symptoms of infection.

What Happens to a Person Who is Infected With West Nile Virus?

Fortunately, most people who are bitten by an infected mosquito do not get sick. However, about 20% (1 person out of every 5) of people bitten by an infected mosquito come down with West Nile fever, an illness that ranges from mild to severe, flu-like symptoms. A serious neurologic form of the disease develops in about 1 out of every 150 people infected with the virus.

- **Milder symptoms.** These symptoms appear within 3-14 days of being bitten by an infected mosquito, and may include fever, headache, nausea, vomiting, swollen lymph glands, and a rash on the trunk of the body (chest, abdomen, back). Symptoms last a few days to a few weeks.
- **Serious symptoms.** The most serious form of West Nile disease results in neurologic disease including encephalitis or meningitis. Serious symptoms may include high fever, stiff neck, stupor, disorientation, muscle weakness, numbness, paralysis, vision loss, tremors, convulsions, and coma. Symptoms may last several weeks and some cause permanent damage and disability. Death can occur as a result of West Nile virus, with elderly people being most at risk of dying.

Is Treatment Available?

- No specific treatment exists. People with mild symptoms usually improve without intervention. People with any *severe* symptoms listed above should seek medical care immediately. They usually will require intravenous fluids, assistance with breathing, and nursing care. There is no vaccine for West Nile virus, yet.

What Precautions Can People Who Are Homeless Take?

- Wear long sleeve shirts and long pants. Hats are also useful.
- Avoid areas with a large number of mosquitoes, such as ravines or areas with a lot of bushes and trees, especially in the early morning and early evening.
- If persons are camping they should try to avoid letting water collect around encampment containers, such as tires or other receptacles. The mosquitoes use the standing water as a breeding area.
- Use mosquito repellent when insects are biting, but follow the instructions on the label. Several options are recommended by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC):
 - ✓ Repellents containing DEET are known to be very effective when used according to direction, and are recommended by the CDC. Some people are particularly sensitive to DEET and should use caution. It is important to read the label and follow the instructions on the label carefully.
 - ✓ While there are many non-DEET repellent options on the market, many of them require frequent reapplication. Two new products were recognized by the CDC this spring as being as effective as DEET. They are products

containing picaridin (sold as Cutter Advanced), and products containing oil of lemon eucalyptus.

▪ **If DEET is used:**

- ✓ Always follow instructions on the label.
- ✓ The repellent should only be applied to exposed skin and clothing. Never apply to skin underneath clothing.
- ✓ Use sparingly and never use over cuts, wounds, sunburn or irritated skin
- ✓ Be sure to explain to clients they need to wash repellent off daily if they applied it to exposed skin.

How Can Your Program Help?

- If you work with homeless people who are outdoors at dusk or dawn, start educating them about West Nile Virus. Clinics, food programs, hygiene centers, and day centers used by homeless people who sleep outside can be especially helpful in raising awareness. You can:
 - ✓ Get flyers from Health Care for the Homeless Network to hand out to your clients or patients. Contact Heather Barr, RN, at (206) 296-5091.
 - ✓ Hold a special informational session and invite Public Health staff to come talk about West Nile Virus (and other issues of concern).
 - ✓ Display posters on protective measures to “fight the bite.” Available from Health Care for the Homeless Network.
 - ✓ On your agency’s “wish list,” ask for small bottles of insect repellent. Ask for products containing DEET or for Cutter Advanced. When you give it out, make sure your clients understand how to use it correctly and review instructions on the label if they cannot understand it themselves.

For late breaking information, call Public Health's West Nile virus hotline: (206) 205-3883

For more information:

Centers for Disease Control: www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dybid/westnile/qa/insect_repellent.htm
(Insect Repellent Use & Safety)

Public Health—Seattle & King County: <http://www.metrokc.gov/health/westnile/index.htm>

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